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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses reform in U. S. higher education. There have been many reforms in higher education in the United States, and they have been well-documented. Two profiles of recent reform initiatives are offered. One is that of student assessment, a reform movement active since the 1980s that presses all colleges and universities to measure educational progress of students, and the other is that of freshman year seminars, an effort to improve the beginning experience of college freshmen that has substantially changed the practices of most U.S. colleges and universities. These reform movements illustrate characteristics of educational reform in the United States. Each academic institution, program, or scholar decides whether to adopt a certain approach. New initiatives are common, but they become a "reform movement" only when many institutions decide to take part. For individual campuses that decide to take action, incrementalism is the primary implementation model. This is the situation in which a small program is given the chance to demonstrate the value of its approach, but has to rely on the judgments of others to gain adherents or see the innovation expanded. (Contains 16 references.) (SLD)

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Reform Initiatives in Higher Education
By Elaine El-Khawas

Introduction
Reform initiatives are numerous in American higher education. Their messages and hopes are widely documented through conferences, journals, newsletters, and funded projects. Many membership associations, networks and informal alliances actively promote new directions for higher education.

The history of American higher education reveals a continuing stream of reform that has affected academic programs, degree requirements, methods of instruction, and organizational structures (Rudolph, 1977; Altbach, 1980; Curry, 1992; Gaff and Ratcliff, 1996). General education requirements have been overhauled, new fields of studies introduced, and new institutions established, all without being labeled as reforms (El-Khawas, 1996).

Visible as these activities are, reform movements are poorly understood as a mechanism by which higher education changes. Levine (1980) described several general patterns. As he noted, reform is usually described in terms of its typical phases: the initiation phase, when aims are set out; the implementation phase, when ideas are put into operation; and a final, institutionalization phase, when reforms try to achieve a stable, enduring form. Presidential leadership is been said to be important, with visible leadership support seen as crucial in getting reforms off the ground. A common assumption is that most reforms are unsuccessful because they come into conflict with ongoing programs or otherwise fail to win broad acceptance. Many reforms are thought to survive only in enclaves, somewhat removed from mainstream programs, or survive only if they change substantially from their original purposes.

Recent studies identify a number of universities that have been increasingly successful in undertaking reform and have tried to influence the practices of other academic institutions (e.g., Ewell, 1991). Survival of a reform may be only one indicator of a reform's success. Another indicator may include having multi-institutional impact, in which the reforms are adopted by many other institutions. The development of a professional network to promote wider understanding of the reform may be another mark of success.

Profiles: Major Reform Movements
Recent reform initiatives can help illustrate some general points about reform in higher education. Two profiles are offered, chosen for differences in their aims: 1) Student assessment, a reform movement active since the mid-1980s that presses all colleges and universities to measure educational progress of students, with notable success; and 2) Freshman year seminars, an effort to improve the experience of beginning college students that has substantially changed the practices of most US colleges and universities.

Student Assessment
Assessment as a reform movement took wing in the early 1980s, prompted by calls for greater accountability by governors of several states. States pressed for greater evidence on the outcomes of college study, and some imposed new requirements on colleges, including annual reporting on institutional performance or a revamping of academic programs. Accreditors also took a strong stand: regional accrediting agencies mandated that institutions conduct outcomes assessments, and many specialized accrediting agencies went a step further, requiring that academic programs be redesigned to link curriculum to the outcomes being assessed (e.g., Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 1991; Glidden, 1998).

Following this initial push, nongovernmental actors took on a strong and eventually dominant role in the assessment movement. Although they worked with state governments and accreditors, they also encouraged institutions to develop assessment procedures appropriate to their own circumstances. The American Association for Higher Education (AAHE) offered a highly visible, continuing forum for information exchange. Several academics and a few institutions, such as Alverno College, became "stars" of the movement, offering advice and commentary. The result was widespread implementation of student assessment methods on the nation's campuses over a relatively short period (El-Khawas, 1996), with prospects for continuing success reinforced by annual AAHE conferences that continue to highlight good practices and implementation strategies.

Freshman Year Seminars
Freshman year seminars are a very successful reform that tackled a long-standing, seemingly endemic problem for higher education, the confusion and difficulties that cause many new students to drop out of college during or at the end of their freshman year. Beginning in the mid-1980s, a new approach gained national attention, based on the experience of one university and one forceful advocate. John Gardner, at the University of South Carolina (USC), had developed University 101, a course that offered guidance to new students about adapting to university life. In 1986, after more than a decade's success, USC established a National Resource Center that has promoted the wider adoption of this approach through annual conferences, publications, research, eventually an academic journal and a network of colleges and universities. The impact has been phenomenal: by the mid-1990s, three-quarters of the nation's colleges and universities reported greater attention to the freshman experience (El-Khawas, 1996).

Some Observations
These profiles illustrate several characteristics of reform initiatives in American higher education:

•Many reforms start small and are "self-funded" by colleges and universities (El-Khawas, 2000). A typical pattern is that reforms emerge out of

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ongoing operations, sometimes as small experiments. Later they connect with networks or associations (or obtain foundation grants to extend their innovation to other institutions). John Gardner was a strong advocate of freshman year reforms at his own institution for a decade before he built a national network devoted to improving the freshman year. Alverno College, long known for its substantial innovations in assessing student competencies, eventually created its own workshops and publications and also worked through associations to expand its impact.

•An idea champion certainly helps. Gardner's role with freshman seminars is but one example. Other important examples include the work of Mina Shaunessey and Harriet Sheridan to promote writing, the efforts of George Kuh at Indiana University to promote student engagement, or the initiatives to spur learning productivity championed by Bruce Johnstone of the State University of New York at Buffalo. For assessment, several persons helped to explain ideas and spur activity, including Peter Ewell of NCHEMS, Ted Marchese and Pat Hutchings at AAHE, and Marcia Mentkowski and others at Alverno College.

•Voluntary associations are major sponsors of reform. They help publicize good ideas and confer national recognition and legitimacy to fledgling local efforts. AAHE and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)—two education associations with large, nationwide memberships—have been strong advocates of curriculum reform. AAHE has been a leader in supporting the assessment movement, for example, while AAC&U has supported efforts to broaden diversity, to establish learning communities and to support writing across the curriculum. Other associations—some directed to specific disciplines or professional groups—also support reform through conferences, workshops, and publications. Networks have developed to support reform, notably the League for Innovation in the community colleges.

•Nongovernmental agencies are visible supporters of reform in American higher education (El-Khawas, 2000). Private foundations, including the Ford, Exxon, and Kellogg Foundations, the Pew Charitable Trusts, as well as regional and local counterparts, are responsive to ideas brought to them by creative individuals and may also spur reform in priority areas they identify. The Ford Foundation, for example, has long supported reforms to facilitate transfer for community college students, as well as university-community partnerships to improve the college readiness of high school graduates in low-income neighborhoods. The Pew Charitable Trusts has vigorously supported new approaches to assessment.

•The federal government's role in reform is limited mainly to small-scale grants to support certain reforms. The U.S. Department of Education has supported initiatives in international education and, recently, the Corporation for National Service has supported the spread of service learning. The Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the federal agency mandated to promote improvement, has been a significant sponsor of reform, awarding small grants to many early, experimental approaches.

•It seems that reform is more complex than often described. Most reforms do not emerge from mandates by government but instead are shaped from the ideas that certain individuals or campuses develop (El-Khawas, 2000). Although external trends can be influential, they also can be ignored or resisted (cf. Cheney, 1991). For an innovative response to develop, concerns about external trends must be reinterpreted or brought inside the institutional setting. Sometimes a reform is assisted by general trends. The freshman year seminars were consistent with growing institutional concerns about retaining students, especially during a time when demographics suggested that fewer students would enroll.

Conclusions

In sum, reform initiatives in higher education follow a characteristically American pattern. Each academic institution, program, or scholar decides whether to take on a certain approach. New initiatives abound in higher education but they become a "reform movement" only when many institutions decide to take part. For many issues, a movement does not develop, and problems continue (cf. Finn, 1988). For individual campuses that decide to take action, incrementalism is the primary implementation model, in which a small program is given the chance to demonstrate the value of its approach but has to rely on the judgments of others to gain adherents or see the innovation expanded. One enters the market of ideas, but cannot guarantee the result.

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